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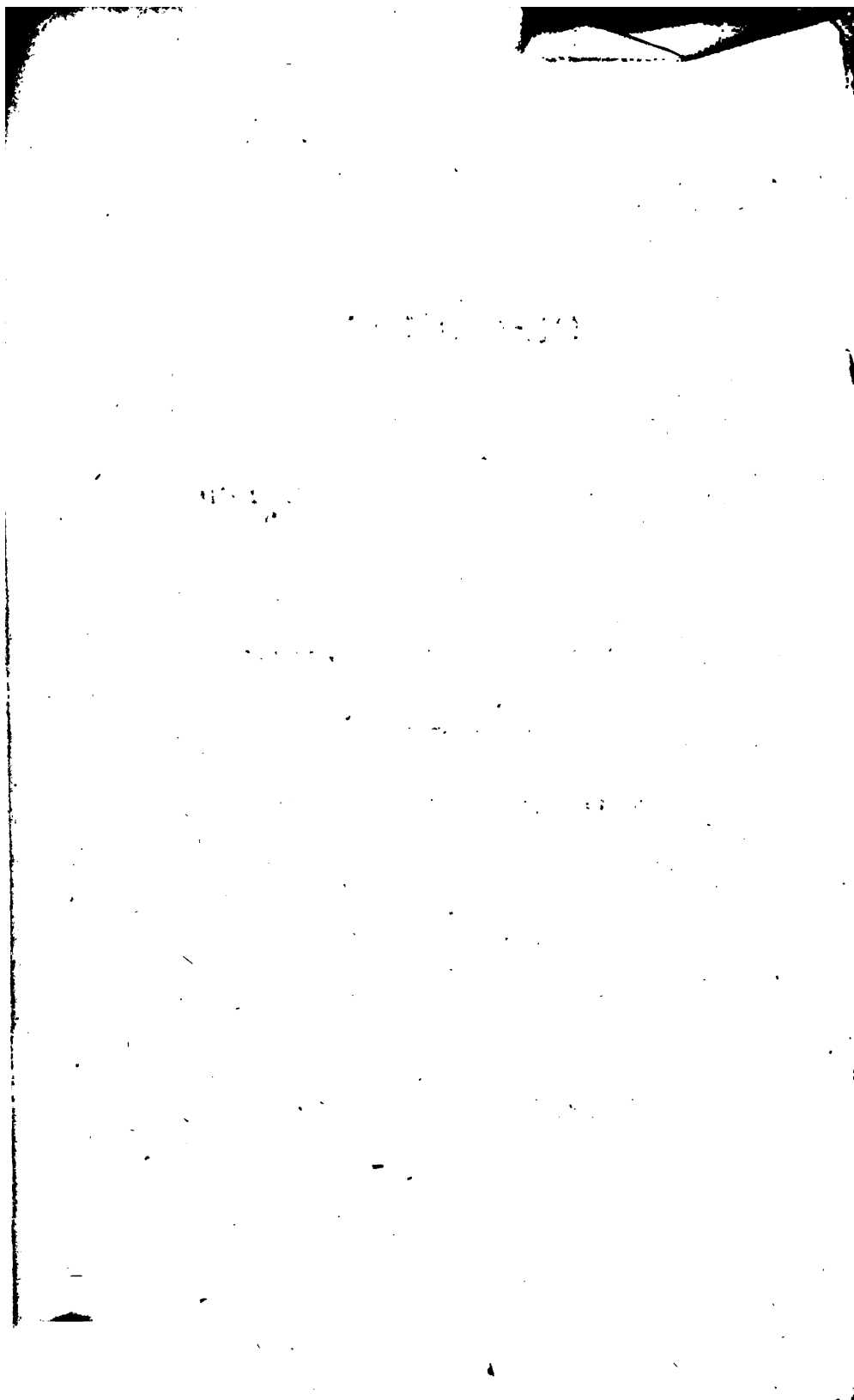
PRESENTED BY

Dr. S. A. Green

Jan. 24. 1894

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AN APOLOGY FOR RATIONAL AND EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY.

44023

A

DISCOURSE

AT THE

DEDICATION OF A NEW CHURCH

ON

CHURCH GREEN, SUMMER STREET, BOSTON.

TO WHICH ARE ADDED

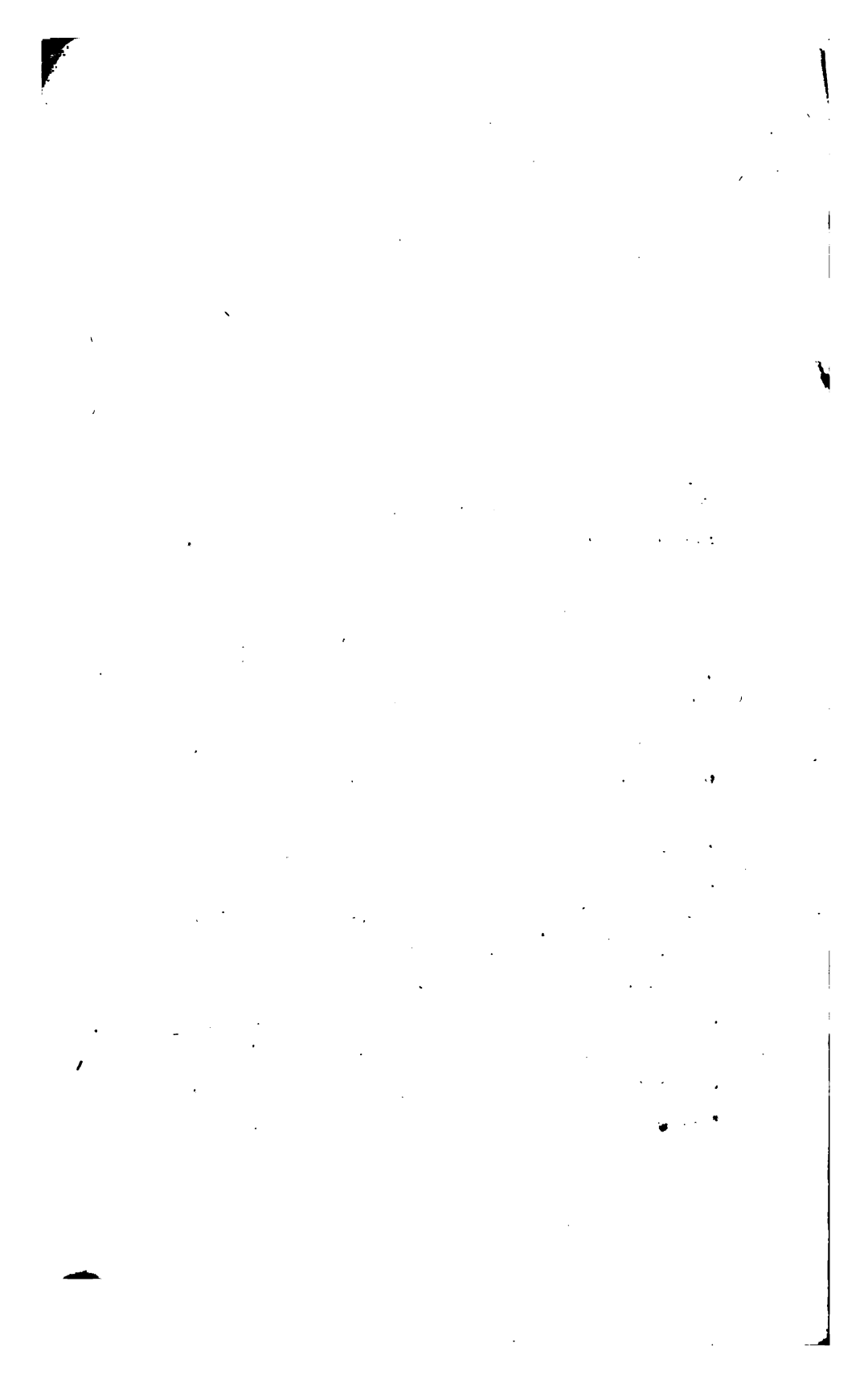
NOTES AND ILLUSTRATIONS.

BY SAMUEL COOPER THACHER.

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1815.



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PREFACE.

I owe to the Society, with which it is my happiness to be connected, some explanation of my delay in complying with their request. The following discourse was not originally designed, and does not now seem to me well adapted for the press. From the extent of the subject, the views which it offers are unavoidably very general. The necessity, also, of preserving, as far as might be, the distinction between a sermon and a dissertation, has occasioned a want of fullness in the reasoning and illustrations, which—though pardonable, perhaps, in what is intended only to be spoken—may not meet the same indulgence, when submitted to the inspection of a reader. I had concluded, for these and other obvious reasons, to decline to comply with the wishes of my friends. This determination, however, has been changed by the information I have recently received, that some parts of this discourse have been much misapprehended,

and misstated. It is now published, as it was originally delivered, except some verbal corrections, and a few unimportant additions.

I am sensible that it may appear presumptuous, to have undertaken to speak in the name of my brethren. The motive, which justified it, however, was well known to those to whom the discourse was addressed; and if it should chance to meet the eye of any others, they will of course perceive, that, though the plural form is used, nothing more than the sentiments of an individual are given. I have endeavoured, it is true, to represent accurately the opinions of that class of christians, with which I habitually think; but it is proper distinctly to say, that no part of this discourse was communicated to any person before its delivery; and that, therefore, the writer is alone responsible for the correctness of the statements it contains.

In speaking of the principles advanced in this discourse, as the *characteristicks* of particular christians, it will not be supposed, that these christians claim to be the exclusive adherers to them. Nothing more is meant, than that these are some of the general maxims, which they agree in receiving, and which they adhere to, it may be, with something more of fidelity and consistency than others. So far from arrogating an exclusive

regard to them for any single body of christians, I take great pleasure in believing, that they are held substantially by a large proportion of the members of all Protestant communions, whether adopting the distinctive names of Lutherans, Calvinists,* Episcopalians, or Arminians. There is no general principle, indeed, taken in this discourse,

* I am permitted, I fear, to claim the authority of those christians, who are known by the name of High Calvinists, or by the kindred name of Hopkinsians, for but few of the principles, which I have advanced. Except in our own country, however, the number, I believe, is small of those, who make the chief peculiarity of Calvin a fundamental article of faith. I subjoin a quotation on this point from the Rev. Robert Hall; who will, I presume, be universally admitted to be the most distinguished ornament of what is called the orthodox or evangelical party in Great Britain. In speaking of the evangelical clergy, he remarks: "we cannot dismiss this part of the subject, without remarking their exemplary moderation on those intricate points, which unhappily divide the christian church; the questions, we mean, in relation to predestination and freewill, on which, equally remote from Pelagian heresy and Antinomian licentiousness, they freely tolerate and indulge a diversity of opinion, embracing Calvinists and Arminians with little distinction; provided the Calvinism of the former be practical and moderate, and the Arminianism of the latter be evangelical and devout. The greater part of them, we believe, lean to the doctrine of general redemption, and love to represent the gospel as bearing a friendly aspect towards the eternal happiness of all to whom it is addressed: but they are much less anxious to establish a polemical accuracy, than to "win souls to Christ." *Strictures on a work entitled "Zeal without Innovation."* p. 35. Lond. 1809.

for which there may not be produced the authority of persons of each of these churches, and those too among the most illustrious for learning and piety.

After these remarks, I need scarcely observe, that, when the phrase "rational christianity" is used in the following discourse, it is by no means to be considered as applicable merely to a comparatively small number of christians, who hold particular opinions on the metaphysical nature of our Lord. Such an appropriation of that phrase I conceive to be entirely unjust: and to breathe something of the same narrowness of spirit, which these christians are not backward to censure in others.

But neither bigotry nor liberality are exclusively of any sect; and all men ought to guard against the tendency, which the pride of spiritual superiority produces, to think that our own opinions are identified with the conclusions of reason, the dictates of conscience, and the commands of God.

The term "apology," in the title of this discourse, is used in its original sense as nearly synonymous with "defence" or "vindication." ΑΠΟΛΟΓΙΑ, the learned reader will recollect is employed by St. Peter in the text,

FEB. 9, 1815.

DISCOURSE.

1 PETER, III. 15.

BE READY ALWAYS TO GIVE AN ANSWER TO EVERY MAN THAT ASKETH YOU A
REASON OF THE HOPE, THAT IS IN YOU, WITH MEENESS AND FEAR.

CHRISTIANITY is a religion addressed to the reason of man. Look around you, my friends, on this temple, which we have now assembled to dedicate to the purposes of christian worship, and see how every thing proclaims, that the religion, we profess, makes its appeal only to our nobler nature. Here is no pomp of a gorgeous and imposing ceremonial. Here no altar smokes with the blood of victims; no incense fills the air with its perfume. No priest is here claiming a mysterious sanctity, as the inspired depositary of the will of heaven. No daring hand has here attempted to represent to the senses the awful person of the Being we adore; or even to suggest through them to the imagination the most distant image of his ineffable glory. All here is simple. All is intellectual. All announces, that the God, whom the christian worships, is

a spirit, and is to be worshipped only in spirit and in truth. The gospel, we see, disdains to owe its influence to the fears of a superstitious temper, or the enthusiasm of a heated fancy. It requires of us only a reasonable service. It demands no tribute, but the homage of the understanding. It accepts no incense, but the secret sigh of the broken and contrite heart. Our bodies, purified from all guilty passions, are the only victims, it calls us to present on its altars; and it is the fire of divine charity alone, which descends from heaven to consume our spiritual holocaust.

Christianity, then, is a religion addressed solely to the intellectual and moral nature of man. Our text implies this truth, when it directs us never to decline to submit the grounds of our christian hope to the tribunal of enlightened reason. It teaches also, that we are not to be indifferent to the manner, in which our fellow men regard our religious sentiments; and this obligation, I conceive, extends not only from christians to unbelievers, but from one christian to another. There exist—it is but too well known—among the different communities of christians, some peculiar modes of regarding the truths of the gospel; and it is fitting, according to the spirit of our text, that we should be ready to justify these modes of thinking to our fellow-believers. The occasion of entering, for the first time, this sacred edifice, has seemed to me a more appropriate one, than usually occurs, for offering some explanations of what may be thought the peculiarities of those, who worship here, as

well as of a large class of christians throughout the world. They have been, I am persuaded, not a little misunderstood; and some observations—though of course very general ones—on the leading features of them, may help to lessen, if not to remove, some unhappy prejudices, and to enlarge the mutual charity of christians. Nothing, however, can be more remote from my intentions, than to assail the conscientious belief of others, except so far as this may seem to be necessarily done by simply vindicating our own. Sorry indeed should I be, if the sounds first heard within these walls should be those of animosity; or should seem to breathe any note, which—however otherwise unworthy—might not accord with those celestial strains, which first announced peace on earth and good will to men.

I. Allow me then to make a preliminary observation; and it is this: that we humbly trust, that we do agree with the great company of the disciples of our Lord in every age, in resting on the same foundation, on which all christian faith is built. We believe—as they do—in one great Author, Supporter, and Controller of the universe, in his nature infinite, in all his attributes perfect, in all his perfections harmonious—the object, the only object, of the supreme worship, reverence, gratitude, trust, love of all his creatures. We believe—as they do—that this glorious Being has sanctified and sent into the world his beloved Son, to redeem our race from iniquity; to secure to them the hope of pardon; to elevate the human mind by the influ-

ence of truth and virtue; and thus to ripen it for higher powers and more exalted blessedness in heaven. We believe, that on him the spirit of the Almighty was poured without measure—that he received all that was necessary to make him our perfect guide, our all-sufficient Saviour, and that to all who repent, believe and obey, he is made of God wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. His words are to us, as the words of God; his commands, as the commands of God. We honour the Son, as we honour the Father, who sent him. The truths, which he taught, we believe to be contained in the holy scriptures; and we take them as the authoritative record of the facts, principles, doctrines, precepts and sanctions of our religion. We receive and freely rest our hopes of salvation on what they teach us, as constituting christian faith and practice. In professing this belief, as we do in sincerity and without the smallest reserve, we hope we may put in a humble claim to the name of christians; and may unpretentiously say with the apostle, if any man trust to himself that he is Christ's, let him of himself think this again, that as he is Christ's even so are we Christ's. We doubtless may err—who may not err?—in our interpretations of the sacred volume; but, if it be so, it is our understandings, we trust, not our hearts, which are in fault. One thing, at least, will hardly be denied, that however much the religious structures of different communions of christians may vary in form, proportion, congruity, harmony and beauty, the *foundation* and the *materials* of all that



is serious and practical in their christianity must be essentially *the same*, as that, which we have adopted.

Undoubtedly however— though we hope we do thus fundamentally agree with all the sincere disciples of our Lord in every nation and age—we have some characteristick and not unimportant modes of viewing the theory of our religion. Our interpretations of the scriptures, any more than those of any other single body of christians, do not agree in all respects with those of all the rest. On these peculiarities I proceed now to remark.

II. 1. I conceive, that the chief characteristick of those christians, in whose name I now presume to speak, arises from the view we take of the sentiment contained in our text and other similar passages of the scriptures. Christianity we believe to be, in the truest sense, a rational religion.* The truths it unfolds conform, we think, to the intellectual and moral nature of man—are consistent each with itself; with one another; with the dictates of conscience, and with the maxims of truth, which the universal reason of man acknowledges and respects. They harmonize, in one word, with the best conclusions and results of those faculties, which God has given us for discerning truth.—Let not our meaning, however, be misunderstood. We neither say, that the truths of christianity were, or ever would have been discovered by reason, unassisted by revelation—nor that the objects, to which these truths relate, can now all be comprehended

* Note A.

by reason in all their extent—nor that they are all necessarily founded on facts, which conform to analogies within our present knowledge. Least of all does reason, in our view of it, advance any claim in *opposition* to revelation. We say only, that reason is, equally with revelation, the gift of God; and that both are given for purposes perfectly consistent and harmonious.* We say, that—as revelation continually appeals to reason for its proofs, and its conformity to sound reason is an important part of its evidence—a *clear and decided repugnance and contrariety* to reason in any of its doctrines would be so far an argument against its truth. We therefore believe, that the truths of the christian religion do contain and can contain nothing, which enlightened reason after full and serious inquiry does not approve. The gospel and a sound philosophy, right reason and a revelation from God must be in perfect harmony, can never really and essentially disagree.

It is difficult to conceive, how any one should fail to see that this must be so, who considers the nature and use of our rational faculties. They are the organs for admitting all truth into the mind; and an intelligent belief of revelation is no more *possible* without the use of reason, than sight is possible without the organ of vision. Religious faith, then, instead of being opposed to reason, is in truth the highest exercise of reason. This is practically felt to be so true, that, when men profess to believe what is opposed to reason, it is only by bringing

* Note B.

themselves to imagine, that they have in some way found a sufficient *reason* for renouncing the use of reason. And thus we see the extreme of scepticism and the extreme of credulity meet and unite in the common absurdity of using *reason* to destroy all confidence in reason.—But our Maker, we may be sure, will never contradict himself in his own works. Having given us reason, as the faculty for discerning truth, he will do nothing, which shall confound and subvert the uses of his gift. He will not say one thing to us in nature, and a different thing in revelation; but as the truths both of reason and revelation flow ultimately from the same source, they will be consistent with themselves and with every other truth.

But indeed, my friends, to assert seriously, that christianity is not consistent with the best dictates of reason, what is it but to offer to God's word the deepest dishonour? It is to degrade its evidence to a level with that of the religion of Mahomet, or the dreams and fictions of the impostors and fanatics of every age.* It is in effect to say, that its proofs depend on the internal sensations of every one who receives it; a ground of belief—in which we are always exposed to the grossest self-deception—which we certainly can never exhibit to other men, and therefore can never obey the direction of the apostle in the text—and which may be pleaded alike, and is alike unanswerable, whether urged by wisdom or folly, learning or ignorance, honesty or fraud.—Such a representation was never learned in the school of the Author and Finisher of our

* Note C.

faith. The New Testament is full of appeals to our perceptions of right and wrong; and every argument it contains is in itself a distinct refutation of the idea, that our faith is to supersede the uses or falsify the conclusions of reason. Every miracle our Lord performed, every prophecy to which he referred, was a call on those around him to exercise their reason. No. The religion of Christ is one, which not only permits, but requires us to prove all things, and hold fast only what is true. Let it not then be reproached with elevating itself on the ruins of human reason. Libel it not, I beseech you, by so unworthy a charge. Betray it not into the hands of infidelity by throwing away those arms, which the most exalted reason rejoices to supply for its defence.

But do we then raise the authority of reason so high, as to deny our need of the aids and irradiations of the holy spirit of God? I trust, my friends, that this is far from being true. Our principles leave this doctrine unimpaired to be believed in its most consolatory form. We say only, that these gracious influences will be vouchsafed to us, in consistency with the other gifts of God, by the instrumentality of regular means; and that they will guide and exalt, not supersede and confound our rational faculties.—Do not object to us still, that our views nourish a temper of pride and presumptuous confidence in human reason, fatal to a humble sense of our dependence on God. Our dependence on God is absolute and entire. If any man will show me in what way this sentiment can be

more fully expressed, I will adopt his language and renounce my own. We differ from those, who make this objection—if we differ from them at all—only in *going farther than they* do in our belief of this truth.—We believe, that we depend entirely on God for ordinary as well as extraordinary blessings; not merely for the special influences of his spirit; but also, quite as much, for *every moment's use* of the faculty of reason.—But, indeed, if the comparison is forced on us, we may venture to ask, which belief is most likely to enkindle a spirit of presumption—that we have received the gift of reason in common with our fellow beings, and that the means and aids for enlightening and elevating it, are alike open to all, who sincerely seek and faithfully use them?—or that belief, which teaches a man, that he is the selected favourite of heaven, and enjoys those miraculous infusions of the divine spirit, which are denied to the honest and intelligent exertions and prayers of his fellow men? In truth, when I think of this latter opinion, I am constrained to say, that it seems to me, that it may claim any other praise sooner, than that of being founded in or promoting the humility of the gospel.*

2. On grounds like these, and in the sense now explained, we believe, that christianity is a rational religion. This belief produces an anxiety, that, in all our statements and exhibitions of its doctrines, their *rationality* should be made apparent. This is, in part, the origin of that *difference of phraseology* and of those *different modes of stating the*

* Note D.

same truths, which are often remarked, and which form perhaps the most striking difference between us and some of our fellow christians, who feel this anxiety less strongly, than we do. We vindicate this peculiarity by the consideration, that it is required by the constant changes, which are taking place in the force and meaning of all language, and by that obscurity, with which time is ever incrusting the words and illustrations of elder days. It is an obsolete phraseology, we think, which causes many sentiments, essentially true and perfectly simple, to be involved in a dark, scholastick, and, as it seems to us, needless perplexity.* It is the cause why many phrases are so often repeated with no distinct ideas attached to them, and a complete negation of meaning is often wrapped up and concealed, even from ourselves, in a consecrated dialect. Beside these considerations, however, we no doubt think also, that many of the changes we make in the mode of stating certain sentiments give a more strictly correct representation of the true meaning of the scriptures. And it would be strange, if no improvements of this kind had been suggested by all the lights which the learning and piety, which have been employed on the sacred volume for a century and a half, have struck out. It would indeed be passing strange, if it were true, that it was in the middle of the seventeenth century, amidst the tumult and extravagance of a civil war, when every other branch of knowledge was comparatively in its infancy—that this was

* Note E.

the time, when the statement of every point in theology received its final improvement and perfection.* I freely own, that this assertion, which implies that the human mind—instead of being only in its twilight—then touched its highest point of theological illumination, seems to me scarcely less extravagant, than to say, that the period, when the maxims of civil government were finally settled for all future generations, was in the country and at the height of that revolution, which has recently convulsed the world to its centre.

8. But though the differences between us and our fellow christians are chiefly verbal, there are others, which may be thought to be more real. There are some doctrines, on which many good men lay a great stress, which we do not teach as any essential part of christian faith. These doctrines relate to modes of the divine nature, and divisions of the divine essence; to the theory of the divine attributes, and the grounds and extent of the divine decrees; to the origin and transmission of sin; to the methods of God's operation on the human mind; to the final reasons of the œconomy, and the ultimate results of the government of God. Most of these speculations evidently involve questions of the most abstruse metaphysicks—questions on which mankind have for ages disputed—and in which the most etherial spirits, after vainly excruciating their understandings, have “found no end in wandering mazes lost.” All that is any way practical with regard to these

* Note F.

speculations we embrace and teach; for it lies obvious to the humblest mind.* For the rest, we conscientiously think, that much of them will for ever be beyond the reach of the human understanding, till it is enlarged in a higher world; and at any rate, that the scriptures either decide nothing with respect to them, or only indistinctly allude to them, or else decide *against* such views of them as are often received. We however certainly can never think, that any thing essential to christian faith or practice depends on the decision of these questions. We think it a thing in itself *most unlikely*, that a religion, designed, like the gospel, to be preached to the poor, the humble and the illiterate quite as much as to the metaphysical and learned, would have any of its fundamental principles connected with these bewildering inquiries.† It seems to us the most beautiful feature of our religion, that it is so perfectly simple, intelligible and practical. We examine the preaching of our Saviour, and find that his addresses to mankind were all of the plainest character—and can we err when we follow his divine example?—We admit in the fullest manner the perfect right of our fellow christians to think otherwise on these points; but we are not able to follow them in what seems to us their perilous and unauthorized speculations. We ask them to forgive us, when we say that the light of revelation seems not to our eyes to extend its guiding rays into these regions of perplexity. We beg them to permit us to remain on the open, plain

* Note G. † Note H.

and illuminated ground of our common christianity; and rather to thank God with us, that we can go on so far together, than to refuse us their charity, because we advance beyond it more timidly and—may it not be?—more cautiously than they.

4. From this view of the practical character of the gospel, and the consequent absence from our preaching of these abstruse speculations, arises what is esteemed another of our characteristicks. We take the great end of all religion to be, simply, to make men good; to produce, in the language of the apostle; charity out of a pure heart, a good conscience, and faith unfeigned. The goodness here meant is, indeed, of the most exalted character; including not only the duties of self-government and social benevolence, but also, most assuredly, our supreme duties to God. It is the goodness, which was exemplified in its perfection by our Lord; it is that goodness which is to fit man for the communion of the spirits of the blessed throughout eternity.* This moral influence on the human character it is, which seems to us to be the end of all religion. It is that, to which every thing, which revelation unfolds, is only subsidiary and ministerial. The whole substance of christianity, therefore, seems to be contained in three words: *the nature of christian duty; the means of performing it; our motives to use them.* The whole theory of christian preaching, then, must be to exhort men to christian duties, in the use of christian means, and by the excitement of christian

* Note I.

motives. We have no conception of the meaning of religion, if it mean any thing different from this. We do confess, therefore, that we feel bound to remember, in its plain sense, the solemn charge of Paul to Timothy: "*it is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they that have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works; these things are good and profitable unto men.*"—It is St. Paul, who is speaking, my friends, not we; and with his warrant, and with the example of a greater than Paul, even his Master and our Master, we ought to think it a small thing to be judged of man's judgment. We must consider the epithet, which is sometimes applied to our discourses, that they are "*moral sermons,*" to be an epithet of honour, not of disgrace. They must share it in common with our Lord's own sermon on the mount.

5. It is another characteristick of our views of religious truth, that they do not lead us to expect single and instantaneous effects from its influence, so much as a gradual and permanent operation. We deny not, that there are real examples of sudden conversions from sin to holiness. We bless God for them. But this is not, we think, the usual history of mankind; nor do the representations of the scriptures lead us to expect it will be so. We do not doubt, that good effects have sometimes been produced on particular persons, by throwing them into a sudden spasm of terror or agony of remorse. But in general we think, that men become virtuous—as they become wise—by constant and

gradual accessions, and not by sudden impulse or miraculous illumination. Our preaching, therefore, does not aim, so much as that of some others, at immediate excitement. We hope, by the blessing of God, to produce a more calm and steady and rational and—therefore, we think, more probably—permanent influence on our hearers. Our manner is consequently less impassioned; in the sense, that we do not so constantly touch the springs of terror in the human breast. We are not insensible, that this manner can never be so acceptable to that class of hearers, who delight to be powerfully moved; who expect from a sermon the effect of a tragedy; and are accustomed to think, that a strong emotion is a great virtue. But though we are sorry to be thought unprofitable preachers by any of our fellow christians, we yet think, that popularity may be purchased too dearly. We seriously doubt the general and permanent good effects of applying a constant stimulus to the stronger passions of the soul. It is apt, we fear, to rouse them at first to unnatural, and not always very valuable exertions; and at last to expend their energy and wear out or palsy their power. It is, however, a question of fact. We do not court, but we certainly do not decline a comparison, as to the practical efficacy of the two modes of preaching, considered in their effects on the *whole* character, through the *whole* of life, of *all* the different classes of mankind.

We confess, then, that our principles lead us to the exercise of caution in our addresses to the pas-

sions. If this were the place for speaking of our individual failings, we should not hesitate to admit, also, that—from the difficulty of finding the exact medium between extremes, which is the great task of human life—this caution may sometimes be carried too far, and degenerate into a coldness and want of becoming earnestness. May God forgive us, wherever this is in any degree the case. There is nothing in our principles, however, which justifies any want of zeal, or excludes at all the most affecting appeals to the best feelings of the human heart. Our views of it, we trust, do not rob religion of any of its salutary power to move and raise and melt the soul. The character of God appears not to us less merciful or less glorious, than to our brethren. Christ seems not less endued with all-sufficient power to enlighten, redeem, and exalt his sincere disciples; nor are his labours and his sufferings for us less entitled to our most grateful and affectionate remembrance. The aids and consolations of the holy spirit of God seem not to us to be less freely or less impartially offered to all who sincerely and humbly ask them, than they do to our brethren. Sin appears not to us less opposed to our nature, and to the benevolent designs of God; nor does its connexion with misery in every stage of our being seem less evidently to be the established and eternal law of the divine government. He, whom such motives and such views as we embrace will not warm and excite to the love of holiness and dread of sin, and to ardent and persevering efforts to produce that love and that dread in those,

who are committed to his care—must be impas-
sive to the influences of all that is most animating
and awful, all that is most touching and sublime in
human conceptions. It surely does not follow;
because we think, that views of religion, produced
and nourished by fear chiefly or alone, will be igno-
ble and degrading, that we are less—in truth we
ought to be *more*—induced to address the principles
of love, hope, gratitude, and, in its due degree, fear
itself, together with all the sympathies and affections
of our moral constitution. We regard it as a very
incomplete and erroneous view of human nature,
as well as of christian theology, to suppose, that
the best effects of our religion are to be felt, or the
highest style of moral character to be produced,
without the use of the affections. The glory and
beauty and perfection of the christian character
will never be seen, except where all the faculties
of our moral and intellectual nature are called
into action to produce and adorn it—where reason
makes itself tributary to affection, where faith is
warmed in the heart, as well as enlightened in the
understanding—where a sense of duty and a sense
of interest, philosophy and sensibility, prudence
and enthusiasm—while they temper and regulate
each others tendencies—unite in prompting to sub-
lime and disinterested benevolence to man and
supreme love and devotion to God.

I might remark on some other and less peculiar
characteristics of those christians, in whose name
I have spoken, but it is necessary that I should
forbear. I will only repeat my hope, that the

observations, which have now been hazarded, will be taken, as I am sure they are meant, in the spirit of entire good will towards those, who differ from us. I profess towards them a real respect. I see among them very many bright and true exemplifications of the christian character. I bear them witness, that they have a zeal towards God. I doubt not, that their modes of representing truth may have a real use to some classes of minds. It may be one of the reasons, why the sacred writings are not framed more systematically and technically, that a provision is thus made for such a difference in the mode of regarding some points of secondary importance, as is adapted to the differences in the mental constitution and habits of mankind. This is a view, which I acknowledge to be refreshing and consoling to my mind, when I consider the different sects, into which the christian world is divided. It enables me to see without pain the success of those, whose views of christian truth vary a good deal from my own; regarding their exertions, as I am thus permitted to regard them, only as diversities of operation under the influence of the same spirit—At least, however, there is nothing in the differences, which have been noticed in this discourse, which need to loosen, far less to rupture the bonds of christian charity or christian fellowship between us and our brethren. They are such differences as might even be made subservient to mutual improvement. If a spirit of mutual candour and friendship could be cultivated, if we would concede to each other the great Pro-

testant right of individual judgment, and if, while contending earnestly for what we believe to be truth, we would remember our own weakness and fallibility, we might contribute to guard each other from that tendency to rush into extremes, to which we are all so liable. After all—whatever may be said or thought in the heat of controversy—it is impossible, that any one should seriously doubt, that *all christians* have ultimately *the same object*. For have they not all the same interest, the same eternal interest; and what imaginable motive can there be, with the immense majority of them, to attempt to deceive others or themselves? How can it be thought, that men, acknowledged to be men of integrity on every other subject, should wantonly and madly desert their principles on that subject only, which is of all the most momentous? Would to God that the time might at length come, when christians would apply the same maxims in judging of each other's motives and views in religion, that they feel to be just in every other case!

But with whatever feelings the views, which we take of the nature and design of the gospel, are regarded by others, we are not at liberty to alter them. We beg our brethren, who think hardly of us for our opinions, to believe, that we have adopted them in the honesty of our hearts. We conscientiously think, that a rational representation is the true representation of God's word. We think, the genius of the age requires, that it should be made, if christianity is to retain any hold of the greater part of thinking and cultivated minds. It

will not do, that, when every other department of human knowledge has been in constant progress, the science of theology alone should remain with only those statements and illustrations, which were given it during the darkness of the middle ages. It is not sufficient to reply, that the belief of many good persons in some of the most important truths is so connected with long established prejudices, that they will be in danger of abandoning these truths along with these prejudices. This is an argument for caution and moderation in our exertions ; but it is no good argument to relinquish them. If Luther and his followers had listened to it, the reformation would not have blessed the world ; and the timid spirit of Erasmus would have purchased its repose at the expense of the loss of the opportunity of emancipating mankind from ignorance and error.—But it is not right, that our fears should be all on one side. While we respect the prejudices of the unenlightened, we ought not to despise the serious objections of the thinking part of mankind. The consequences of presenting to them only such views of religion, as revolt alike their understanding and moral sense, must be, a real, though, it may be, a secret abandonment of all faith in its authority. A double doctrine will thus be established, of thinking with the initiated and talking with the vulgar—a system, which, as has been finely and truly said, “is beyond any permanent condition of human society destructive of ingenuousness, good faith and probity ; of intellectual courage and manly character ;

and of that respect for all human beings, without which there can be no justice or humanity from the powerful towards the humble."*

Having then such views of the importance of the principles, which we have embraced, and believing, as we do, that they correspond with the results of the researches of the ablest and most pious inquirers after the truth as it is in Jesus, the path of our duty is plain before us. We must follow it at any hazard. If we did not, the holy confessors of our faith in every age would disown us, the intrepid genius of the reformers would disdain us, the sacred shades of our fathers would reproach us for shrinking from our duty and disgracing our illustrious origin; and where—oh where should we appear, when called to give up our great and final account!

It is with these views of christian truth, that we now enter this temple to dedicate it to Almighty God. And may he grant that—so far as they are just—they may here be preached and heard, till this lofty spire bows under the hand of time, and these massive walls crumble into their primitive dust.

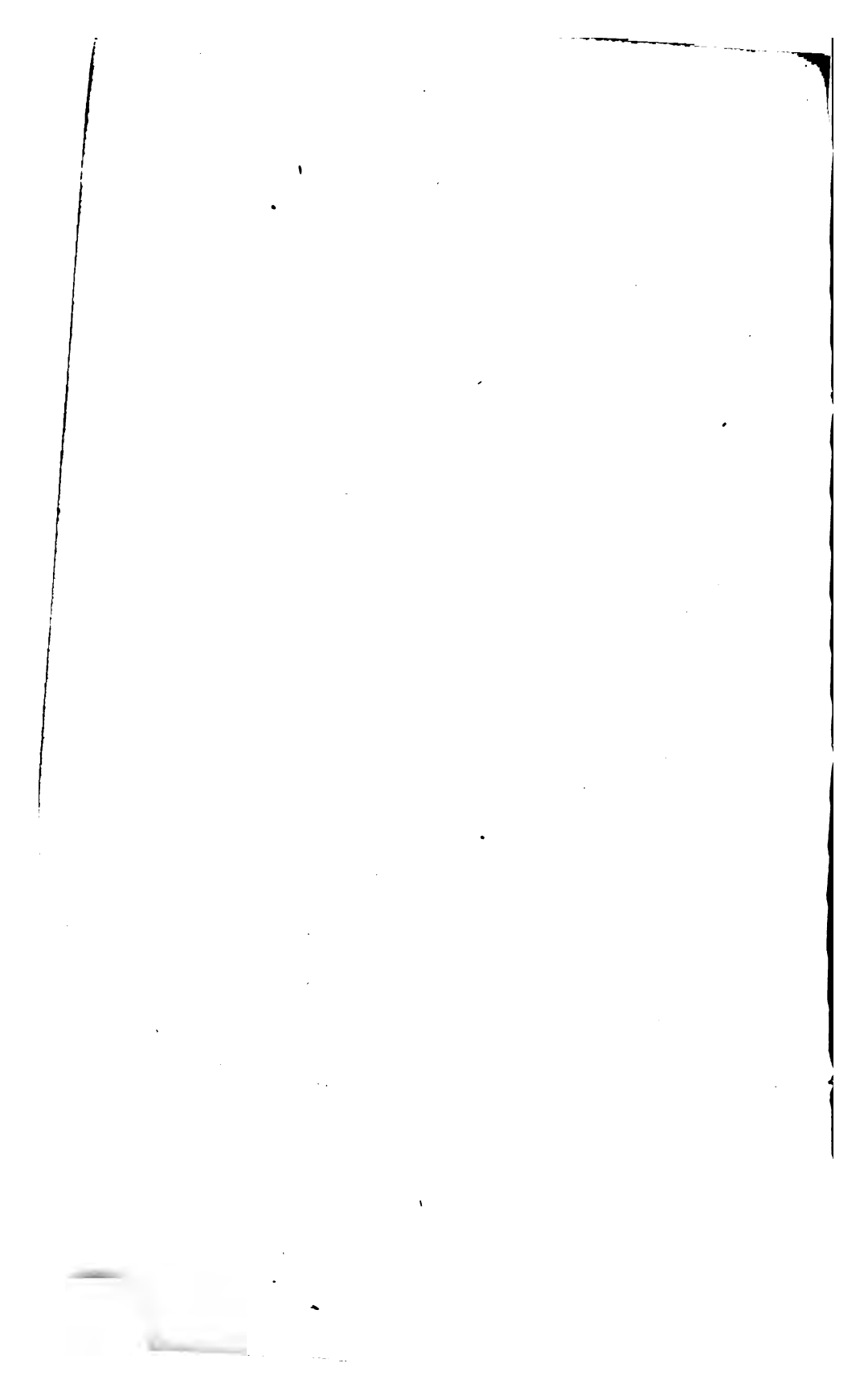
III. It would correspond, I believe, to a general custom on occasions like the present, if we were now to look back to the ancient history of this church. But our church has no history, beyond the short and simple annals of the ministrations it has regularly witnessed. When however I say, that it affords no materials for publick history, I conceive

*. Sir James Mackintosh's review *De L'Allemagne par Mad. de Staël*.

that I give to it the highest praise. For history, we know, records not on its blood-stained page the peaceful triumphs of religion in private life, but is too often the register only of intrigue and warfare, of the crimes and enterprises of bad ambition. It is now nearly a century of years, since a temple was first erected on this spot, which had been consecrated by the piety of our fathers from time immemorial to this sacred use. It was not established in the spirit of schism; but was the result of the regular overflow of other churches, many of the members of which contributed towards the expense of the undertaking. The progress of this church has been as harmonious, as its origin was peaceful. It has never been found in collision with any other church. Its spirit has always been liberal. Its terms of communion have never been narrow and exclusive. Its ministers have always been catholic in their feelings. The list of them is begun by the venerable Checkley, followed by the affectionate Bowen, the interesting and eloquent Howe, the acute and profound Everett. I could add another name, but my heart is forbidden to utter its feelings. The house which was first erected here, after having stood for ninety-seven years, has now given place to that in which we meet. Erected, as it has been, in most disastrous times, I may be allowed to consider it as a noble monument of the spirit of our citizens; a pledge that they consider religion as their best refuge in calamity; and that the last sentiment they are willing to lose, is that of respect for her worship.*

* Note K.

Come, then, fathers, brethren, friends, christians, let us again invoke the presence and blessing of the most high God. We solemnly consecrate this temple to Him—to the religion of his Son, who died for us—to the spirit of evangelical piety, charity and truth. Henceforth may the angels of celestial love take up their dwelling in this sanctuary, and ever may they carry from it to the mercy seat of heaven the tribute of humble, grateful, devoted hearts, the offerings of sincere and acceptable worshippers!—Ye holy walls! henceforth sacred to the religion of Jesus—peace be within you! For my brethren and companions sake, I will now say—peace be within you! Never may ye be polluted by hypocritical prayers—never may ye echo with heartless praises—ever may the words of truth be dispensed within you in their simplicity and uncorrupted purity—never may ye witness the love of Christ commemorated here with unthankful remembrance, or his cause dishonoured by faithless professions! Here may all the best influences of the gospel—all its regenerating, sanctifying and elevating influences—ever be felt! And long after the voice, which now feebly sounds within you, is hushed in silence—long after these worshippers shall all have passed away from the earth—may their children and their children's children to the latest generation here taste the joy and peace of believing, and find that this is unto them, as it has been to their fathers, none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven!



NOTES AND ILLUSTRATIONS.

A.

THE general principle of the conformity of christianity to the conclusions of enlightened reason will hardly be disputed by intelligent Christians. It is a ground, which has always been taken by the most able and judicious defenders of the gospel. It was very fully surveyed and illustrated about the middle of the last century, by Dr. Doddridge, Dr. Benson, Dr. Randolph, and Dr. Leland, in the controversy occasioned by the deistical tract entitled *Christianity not founded on Argument*.

B.

“Reason is natural revelation, whereby the Eternal Father of Light and Fountain of all Knowledge communicates to mankind that portion of truth, which he has laid within the reach of their natural faculties. Revelation is natural reason enlarged by a new set of discoveries, communicated by God immediately, which reason vouches the truth of by the testimony and proofs it gives that they come from God. So that he, that takes away reason to make way for revelation, puts out the light of both ; and does much the same, as if he would persuade a man to put out his eyes, the better to receive the remote light of an invisible star by a telescope.”

Locke's Essay, B. iv. c. 19.

C.

“To those especially, who seek for conviction in certain inward feelings, which the warmth of their imaginations represents to them as divine, I would recommend the serious consideration of this important fact : that the foundation, which *they* lay for the Bible, is no other than what the Mahometan is accustomed to lay for the Koran. If you ask a Mahometan, why he ascribes divine authority to the Koran, his answer is :

because, when I read it, sensations are excited, which could not have been produced by any work, that came not from God. ***But do we not immediately perceive, when the *Mahometan* thus argues from inward sensations, that he is merely raising a phantom of his own imagination?***The Christian, who thus argues, may answer, indeed, and answer with truth, that his sensations are produced by a work, which is *really* divine, while the sensations excited in the Mahometan are produced by a work, which is only *thought* so. But this very truth will involve the person, who thus uses it, in a glaring absurdity. In the first place he appeals to a criterion, which puts the Bible on a level with the Koran : and then to obviate this objection, he endeavours to show the superiority of his own appeal, by *presupposing* the fact, which he had undertaken to *prove*.”—*Prof. Marsh's Lectures. P. II. L. III. p. 51—52. American edition.*

D.

I am anxious, that the principles, which have been advanced under this head of the discourse, should be taken with the explanations and limitations, which I have endeavoured studiously to annex to them. I would particularly beg it to be observed, that it is by no means denied, that the *objects*, to which the truths of revelation relate, may contain many things not fully comprehensible by reason. Indeed there is perhaps no object presented to us either by nature or revelation, which the human mind can be said entirely and perfectly to comprehend in all its relations and properties. The humblest flower, that springs up under our feet, contains that, which the most exalted philosophy can only teach us to wonder at and admire. Still, however, so far as a true philosopher asserts any thing with regard to its existence, structure, growth, or any of its properties, powers, or connections, he perfectly understands what he asserts, and employs language only in such a sense as may be intelligible to others. In like manner, all truth, intended to be conveyed to the human mind, must be intelligible in itself, and conveyed in language intelligible by those to whom it is addressed. The truths of reve-

lation form no exception. They are expressed in words, which are the signs of human ideas, and which, therefore, can only be employed to convey the ideas, which men have annexed to them. We may, of course, form ideas of all the propositions contained in the scriptures. But of that which is unintelligible, the mind can take no cognizance—can have no belief—can give to it no assent. We may make the *form* of a proposition with respect to it; but it cannot have the *reality* of one. It is nothing—nothing but idle words. We need not scruple to say, that to believe a proposition, which either includes a contradiction, or else has no assignable, no intelligible meaning whatever, is a thing which is in its nature impossible. The scriptures undoubtedly can contain no such proposition.

It is evidently very consistent with these remarks, to believe, that revelation may indulge us with only very limited and imperfect views of many interesting truths. We now see through a glass, darkly. But these intimations, we are to remember, are all that revelation *designs* to give us, because they are probably all we are now capable of understanding, or all which can fitly be made known to us in a state of probation. We are not permitted to consider them merely as food for our conjectures, or materials from which we are to construct our own precarious systems. I do not mean, that we are bound, or that we are able wholly to repress the curiosity, which they so naturally excite; but we are to beware how we place our conjectures on a level with the truths, which the gospel unfolds. When treating of truths, as the doctrines of scripture, and the fundamentals of Christian faith, we are to stop where the scriptures stop. We are not to be wise above what is written.

Let us take, as an example, what the scriptures declare as to the efficacy of the death of our Saviour. There is perhaps no proposition on this subject, in which so many Christians would agree, as that of Paley;* “that our Lord’s death and sufferings are spoken of in the scriptures in reference to human salvation, as the death and sufferings of no other being are spoken of; and that the full meaning of these passages cannot

* Paley’s Works Vol. IV. Sermon XXIII passim.

be satisfied without supposing, that these sufferings and death had a real and essential effect in procuring that salvation." It is not my purpose to inquire into the accuracy or completeness of this statement. Granting that it is a correct representation of what the scriptures teach on this subject, and of all that they clearly teach, it would follow, from what is remarked in the preceding paragraph, that we are not at liberty to declare from our own conjectures, or from a very few and obscure texts of scripture, *in what* the efficacy of our Lord's death consists, or *why* so great a sacrifice was *necessary* for the remission of sins. These are the *secret* things, which belong unto the Lord our God; and it is those things only *which are revealed*, which belong unto us.

In the application to the interpretation of the Bible of these principles with regard to the office of reason, which I have now endeavoured to illustrate, there is need, I confess, of great caution; but also of great fidelity. They can never lead us to reject a single article clearly revealed there, as an article of Christian faith. They can never teach us to say, that the scriptures err; but they may and will sometimes lead us to suspend our belief in the correctness of our own researches into the scriptures, or to say, that we do not at once understand a particular passage, or that some interpretation different from the obvious and literal one is the true meaning. If then, in the study of the scriptures, we should find any thing *apparently* self-contradictory and unintelligible, we ought to suppose the defect to be in *us*, not in them. A longer study will show us, that the difficulty was only apparent. But if this apparent contradiction should still remain after all our inquiries, it is surely better to suppose, that we misunderstand the scriptures, than that they are unworthy of God.

Every Protestant of every sect acknowledges these truths, and acts upon them with more or less consistency. On what grounds, for example, do we all reject the doctrine of transubstantiation. The Catholic may produce to us the words of our Saviour: *this is my body*: and again: *except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, ye have no life in you*. It is not to be denied, that the plain and

literal meaning of all this is, that we do eat and drink in the Eucharist the actual body and blood of our Lord; or as the Catholick has it, the body and blood of Almighty God himself. But all Protestants, with united voice, exclaim, that this interpretation is impossible; that it includes every kind of absurdity and contradiction, and that the reason, which God has given us, authorizes us to say, that no evidence could render such a doctrine credible. We proceed then to show, from other passages of scripture, as well as from its general strain and spirit, that the language of our Saviour in this case is merely a figure of speech authorized by the genius and idiom of the languages of the east.

The zeal of some Christians, in vindicating the scriptures from the reproach of containing any doctrine inconsistent with reason, has undoubtedly sometimes led them to serious errors. But while we steadily discountenance a rash and intemperate criticism, we are bound not to despise too lightly their motives, which may be respectable, or their learning and talents, which may be great and splendid. We ought to be well assured, that there are no circumstances, which may have innocently led our brethren into what we esteem error, and especially to be certain, that for doctrines, which we believe and they deny, there can be adduced passages of scripture equally and more express and unequivocal, than those which the Catholick can cite for the belief of the actual presence.

To the infidel, who triumphs in the belief, that the scriptures are so loose and indeterminate as to admit of opposite interpretations, I would briefly reply. It would be very strange, if books, like the scriptures,—of such high antiquity, written in languages so unlike our own, and now no longer spoken, in countries too where habits, manners, taste, customs and opinions, so different from our own, prevailed—to say nothing of the difficulties produced by the modern and unauthorized division of them into chapters and verses—it would indeed be strange, if such books should be as easy of comprehension in every part, as if they were written in our own country, and in our vernacular tongue. The only inference,

which can be admitted as a legitimate and necessary one from the fact of the differences among serious and intelligent Christians is simply this: that the doctrines in question between them can constitute no essential part of Christianity.

The difficulties in the interpretation of the New Testament are chiefly found in the epistles of St. Paul. On the causes of this peculiar obscurity in his writings, I beg leave to refer to a sermon on this subject by my ever-lamented friend, the late Rev. J. S. BUCKMINSTER.—Before it is concluded, that the epistles do not admit of a perfectly consistent and rational interpretation, the comments of Grotius and Locke should be diligently studied. I refer to these great men the more readily, because, as laymen, they were exempt from any professional bias, and because their competency to these inquiries is above all question.

E.

“You may have observed, that persons, in attributing fanaticism to evangelical teachers, often fix on the phrases, more than the absolute substance of evangelical doctrines. Now would it not be better to show them what these doctrines are, as divested of these phrases, and exhibited clearly in that vehicle, in which other important truths are presented, and thus at least to repress their scorn? If sometimes their approbation might be gained, it were a still more desirable effect. Persons, who had received unfavourable impressions of some of the peculiar ideas of the gospel, from having heard them advanced almost exclusively in the modes of phrase on which I have remarked, have acknowledged their prejudices to be diminished, after these ideas had been presented in the simple general language of intellect. We cannot indeed so far forget the lessons of experience, and the inspired declarations concerning the dispositions of the human mind, as to expect that any improvement in the mode of exhibiting christian truth will render it irresistible. But it were to be wished, that every thing should be done to bring reluctant minds into some degree of doubt, at

least, whether if they cannot be evangelical, it is because they are too rational." *Foster's Essays*, p. 210, 2d Am. edition.

F.

I fear I shall grieve some excellent persons, when I say, that I here allude to the Westminster Assembly's Catechism. It will be observed, however, that these remarks do not deny, that this compend has various and great merits, for the time, when it was made; but are merely intended to suggest the inquiry, whether it ought to be considered as the final result of all that the human mind can do, in stating the doctrines of our religion. Unless it have this perfection, it cannot be right to speak of it as the standard by which "to try all doctrines;" to use it as the text of sermons and to teach it to young and old, as if it were an inspired digest of the scriptures themselves. I make these observations with the more confidence, since this catechism is confessedly so imperfect, that the General Association of this state, composed of ministers, who appropriate to themselves the name of orthodox, cannot be brought to subscribe this instrument without the qualifying clause, that they receive it only "*for substance.*" When, in addition to this, it is considered, that this work, after all, contains nothing more than the sentiments of the majority of a body of men, in an age not otherwise thought to be very enlightened, with no peculiar exemption from error, and certainly under many very great disadvantages for calm and dispassionate judgment, it will not be considered as a forfeiture of one's christianity to believe, that some of its doctrines may now be stated in a manner more conformable to the improvement of biblical science and the general progress of the human mind.

It is almost needless to observe, that the comparison suggested in the text is not meant to extend farther than to imply, that, as times of extraordinary excitement and contention concerning the principles of government are evidently unfavourable to wise decisions in politicks, a season of similar excitement, with regard to religious, as well as political opinions, cannot be the most friendly to the best decisions on points of theology.

G.

The distinction between what is practical and what is speculative in these subjects is a very clear one. Take for example the discussion relating to the sinfulness of the human heart. The gospel addresses all mankind as sinners; it takes it for granted, that there are deep and powerful, and, if indulged, ruinous tendencies to evil in the human breast. There is no dispute on this *fact*. All christians believe it. But what is the method, which the New Testament takes to convince us of this truth? Is it by dissertations on the *origin* of sin, or the *manner* in which it was introduced into our constitution? or by showing that these propensities to evil have *no antagonist principles* within us, but that we are called on, at the peril of our salvation, to contend against them without arms and without strength? I appeal to the unprejudiced readers of this sacred volume to say, that this is not the mode in which our Lord or his apostles address mankind. No: They think it enough to call upon every man to look honestly and humbly into his own character, to compare himself with God's law, and to let conscience be faithful to its office. No man, who does not instantly perceive, after such an examination, that *in many things he offends daily, and in all comes short of the glory of God*, will ever be convinced of this fact by ten thousand arguments relating to original and imputed sin. A man can be humbled for no sin, can repent of no sin, can be converted from no sin, till he is made conscious, that he is PERSONALLY guilty of it—on the *facts of the case*, of the sinfulness of the human heart, there can never be any doubt or dispute, in individual instances, among serious and honest men. A similar *practical agreement*, I apprehend, might be shown with regard to all the doctrines, to which I refer in this part of the discourse.

It will be remarked, that I have no where meant to imply, that the christians, whose sentiments I defend, have no opinions on these speculative questions; or that they entirely agree in their judgments upon them; or that they attach no importance to the different sentiments, which are embraced

with respect to them. Undoubtedly among all thinking men there will be varying opinions on all these difficult points; and there are not a few persons, whose claims to the name of truly liberal as well as learned divines are not to be disputed, whose views on some of these questions approach towards those, which are embraced by christians of the most rigid and exclusive character. The only point, in which they would all agree is, in saying, that those *practical principles*, in which all christians unite, are of higher authority and weightier importance than our metaphysical speculations can be; and in declining therefore to make a man's opinions with regard to any of these disputed points the test of his christian character or the term of christian and ministerial communion with him.

H.

It is with religion, as it is with morals, nothing can be more plain than its practice, nothing more difficult than many parts of its theory. This, it should seem, ought to lead a christian teacher to the same course, which a judicious moralist pursues. Who, that was desirous of impressing on mankind at large the practice of the virtues of benevolence or gratitude, would think of discussing before a miscellaneous audience the controversy with regard to the origin of our moral ideas, and contending either for the theory of Cudworth, or Hutcheson, or Butler, or Price? Would he not rather appeal at once to our sense of right and wrong, and call us to read those sacred and indelible characters, in which God has written the obligation of these virtues on the human heart?—These different theories are, no doubt; in a philosophical point of view of great moment. But whether he embraces the one or the other of them, does not every wise and good man acknowledge the supreme authority and importance of those *facts, in which all good men agree*, and allow that his ultimate appeal must always be made to the universal moral sentiments and emotions of the human race? “Fortunately for mankind,” says Mr. Stewart, “the great rules of a virtuous conduct are confessedly of such a nature, as to be obvious to every sincere and well disposed

mind. And it is in a peculiar degree striking, that, while the *theory* of ethicks involves some of the most abstruse questions, which have ever employed the human faculties, the moral judgments and moral feelings of the most distant ages and nations with respect to all the most essential duties of life are one and the same." *Philosophy of the Mind*, Vol. II. p. 392—3. Best. edit.

I.

To avoid the possibility of misconstruction, I wish to repeat, that by the *moral influence* of the gospel is meant its influence in the production of inward, as well as external obedience; the holiness both of the heart and the life. "Repentance towards God" of course must stand in the foremost rank of christian duties; and "faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" must be the *origin, motive, principle*, of that reformation, which is always included in the "repentance, which is unto salvation." In like manner, all of what are called the "doctrines" of the gospel are, in our view of the subject, included under its *motives*. There is no value in the mere belief of any of them, except so far as that belief operates on us "in overcoming the world," in "purifying the heart," and inducing "newness of life and new obedience."

There is, perhaps, no one principle of such primary importance, both to the theological inquirer and the practical christian, as that this moral influence of the gospel is its great and ultimate design, as *far as it respects man*. It is that grand and luminous truth, around which all the other truths of the religious system arrange themselves, and from which they derive all their lustre and all their value to man. It is a principle attended with a plenitude and clearness of evidence, which no other possesses. Any thing really inconsistent with it, we may be sure must be false. Tout ce qui tend à l'immoralité n'est jamais qu'un sophisme. Let any one, who doubts the extent and importance of this principle, attempt to state to himself any other end of the christian revelation, than *to fit men for heaven by making them good*, and he will at once see, that he can assign no one, which must not ultimately be

resolved into this. Who indeed can have any doubt on this point, who considers how distinctly it is declared, that the ultimate end of the death of our Saviour himself is its moral influence on his disciples. "And this we are assured of," saith Bp. Fowler, "by abundance of express scriptures, some few of which we will here produce:"

Rom. vi. 6. Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, *that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve him.*

2 Cor. v. 15. He died for all, *that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him that died for them and rose again.*

Gal. i. 4. Who gave himself for our sins, *that he might deliver us from this present evil world (viz. from its corrupt practices) according to the will of God and our Father.*

Ephes. v. 25, 26, 27. Christ loved the church and gave himself for it, *that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it unto himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.*

Colos. i. 21, 22. And you that were sometime alienated and enemies in your minds by wicked works, hath he now reconciled in the body of his flesh through death *to present you holy unblamable and unprovable in his sight.*

Titus, ii. 14. Who gave himself for us, *that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify to himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.*

1 Peter, i. 18. For as much as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, *from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish and without spot.*

1 Peter, iii. 18. For Christ also once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, *that he might bring us to God, &c.* That is, saith Calvin upon the place, that we might be so consecrated to God as to live and die to him.

1 Peter, ii. 24. Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, *that we being dead to sin should live to*

righteousness; by whose stripes ye were healed. Design of Christianity, by Bp. Fowler, apud Watson Theological Tracts, vol. vi. 339, 340.

K.

The following chronological memoranda may perhaps be valued by the members of the New South Society.

First meeting on record for the formation of the society, July 14, 1715. New House dedicated: sermons by Dr. Cotton Mather and Rev. Benjamin Wadsworth, January 8, 1716. Church covenant signed, and the Rev. Samuel Checkley ordained Pastor, April 15, 1719. Rev. Penuel Bowen ordained colleague Pastor, April 30, 1766. Rev. Joseph Howe ordained Pastor, May 19, 1773. Rev. Oliver Everett, do. January 2, 1782. Rev. John Thornton Kirkland, do. February 5, 1794. Inducted President of Harvard College, November 3, 1810. Present Pastor ordained, May 15, 1811. Old house taken down, April, 1814. New house dedicated, Dec. 29, 1814.

I subjoin at the request of some highly valued friends the following description of the New House, which first appeared in the publick papers.

THE NEW STONE CHURCH.

The new Church on Church-green, at the easterly end of Summer street, is built of the best Chelmsford granite, and of the following dimensions. The body of the building is octagonal, formed in a square of seventy-six feet diameter: four sides being forty-seven feet, and four smaller sides twenty feet each. Three large windows are in two of the principal sides, and one in each of the angles and in the rear. The height from the ground is thirty-four feet, and finished with a Dorick cornice of bold projection. The porch is of equal extent with